

(Reprinted from *The Monetary Times*, March 12, 1920.)

## IRRIGATION FARMING AROUND LETHBRIDGE

First Conceived as Government Project—Some Instances of  
Private Enterprise—Dominion and Provincial  
Assistance Required

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(Plans for irrigation were described in Mr. Marnoch's article entitled "Better Balanced Farming" in *The Monetary Times* of November 29, 1918. These plans have now reached the stage where financing must be considered.)

"**H**UMAN natur' is a rum un, she is," was the remark of the immortal Squeers on more than one occasion. And the same comment comes readily to one on picking up a little booklet published away back in 1893—just twenty-seven years ago—bearing the title *Irrigation in the Territories; Should Parliament Provide for Irrigation Works in Southern Alberta and Western Assiniboia?*

### A Bit of Ancient History

"There's nothing new under the sun." The wise seers who published this interesting pamphlet thought, no doubt, in their wisdom and in their innocence, that so clear a case had but to be stated and action would certainly follow. But vision was not enough. Hard experience had to bring us to school, and slow demonstration had to bring out the facts; and now we are wise after many events. Yet we are no wiser than they were when they said more than a quarter of a century ago that "whenever there has been a 'wet' season with an abundant rainfall—as may happen once in three or four years—wheat, oats, barley, the native grasses, roots and vegetables of every description reach perfection and compare favorably with those of any country in the world both as regards quality and quantity per acre." The crops of the year 1915 around Lethbridge showed us just that; the rainfall was abundant, and the "fall irrigation" that all the grain farms received from the soft, wet snowfall in October, 1914, combined to produce the wheat crop of over sixty bushels average—in some cases going beyond seventy-five bushels per acre—that has been described as "that phenomenal crop" by the world's experts. And we have not failed to learn something, too, from the spells of dry years; for in spite of the laxness of governments and their inaction and lethargy, private enterprise has since 1900 gradually developed a practical demonstration of irrigation farming around Lethbridge;

and the 80,000 acres now watered there produced, on a most conservative estimate, an average yield of \$55 an acre in 1919.

### **Government Ownership Was Invoked**

In the present great and spacious days of calling for government ownership of everything under the sun, recollect now, if you please, that all the great irrigation development that is now about to take place around Lethbridge was asked for, pleaded for, twenty-seven years ago, to be taken up under government ownership! And let us take a look along the long and tedious trail that has been blazed by private ownership. First in the line of history comes The North-Western Coal and Navigation Company, Limited, a company formed by the Galt family away back in 1883. The old country capital that was persuaded into that enterprise by Sir Alexander Galt was used to put down the first mine into that rich seam of excellent household coal at Lethbridge; which it was intended should find its way to the markets by water transport down the Old Man and the South Saskatchewan Rivers to the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway. But the demand for the coal was so great that it was soon found necessary to build a railroad to give winter and summer carriage; so the old narrow gauge "turkey trail" was built from Lethbridge to the east at Dunmore Junction; and another turkey trail was laid southwards to Coutts at the international boundary. More capital was brought in, and the name of the company was changed to The Alberta Railway and Coal Company.

### **Private Enterprise Had to do It**

Then Elliott T. Galt, who had taken over the management from his father, found his company in the undisputed ownership of some one and one-quarter million acres of railway grant lands, handed to them by the government of the day. What was he to do with them? Nearly everybody said they were worthless for anything but cattle and horse ranching; had not the government utterly declined to hear the pleadings of the seers that the lands should be irrigated? He believed they could; so did C. A. Magrath, who joined him in the management of the company. But the shareholders had waited long for a return on their money; and they felt little like continuing their disbursements, although by this time the coal mining part of the business looked promising. The company was hard put to it to find money enough even to survey the land and the mountain streams from which the waters might be brought.

One man only in the government of the day had some vision; Mr. (now Sir) Clifford Sifton was Minister of the Interior; he gave the incentive to what we now call "the traditional policy" of carrying out the preliminary surveys.

The company carried these farther in detail in regard to lands around the now thriving towns of Raymond, Magrath and Coaldale, and the city of Lethbridge. But there was no money to install the works. So they went to the south, and made an arrangement with a community of practised irrigation farmers in the state of Utah; they came up, and built the headgates and canals for about 100,000 acres, and took their pay part in grubstake and part in land at a nominal price per acre. The works were built. But now these farmers in turn found themselves hampered by lack of capital resources. So they perforce had to confine their efforts largely to grain farming operations on the usual extensive lines. Seasons of fair rainfall enabled them to make some headway in growing wheat; and the establishment of alfalfa and hay fields had to wait over. Development under irrigation was slow. But as this one and that one among those whom they thought were the over-cautious began to forge ahead by the industrious use of irrigation, passing in the race those seemingly livelier ones who took a wheat gamble and got intermittent crops, there gradually came a recognition that the slower method was the surer, and much the more profitable in the long run.

#### **Company Had Economic Struggle**

In the meantime the company, now called The Alberta Railway and Irrigation Company, using its coal profits for improving the coal mines, installing modern machinery and bringing the mines at Lethbridge gradually up to their present output of 2,000 tons a day, got rather discouraged about their land holdings. So when anyone came along with an offer of \$1, or \$2, or \$3 an acre for the unwatered lands, the sales were duly made. Bye and bye, the grain-growing possibilities looked better and better. Those who had bought at low prices sold out at \$10, \$15 and \$20 an acre, mostly to other people who bought simply for a turnover on their money. Those again went south and found farmers who were willing to come in and start grain growing. Hudson's Bay lands, school lands and homestead lands were also filled up.

#### **Farmers Had Economic Struggle Too**

Then another struggle began. Our new farmers sometimes got good crops; sometimes poor. They saw the irrigation farmers struggling; in good grain years with fair rainfall they jeered; in years of short rainfall they envied. The grain farmers' soils began to drift. The tale of years told the real facts about the precipitation records. And by 1918 the countryside was convinced that the seers had been right, and that irrigation should be brought without delay to all the lands that could get water.

There is a temptation here to digress into a dissertation on government ownership. Our pamphleteers of 1893 pleaded

for government development of lands that were then in government ownership; their pleas were in vain. They were right in theory; the theory is right. But we are a practical people in a practical world, and development is by practice, not by theory. In short, we come round to practical development. The Dominion government has recognized at least its duty to assist and advise; the surveys continue to be made. The Alberta government is about to make recognition of its duty to help its people by extending the law under which communities of farmers may establish irrigation districts; and it seems likely that the Alberta legislature may, insofar as is in its power, give assistance in financing and controlling the works. The Dominion government has already indicated willingness also to assist in financing. So that we come back to what is practical—that private enterprise must pioneer, and that governments should assist, advise, and, at least insofar as they aid in financing, they should exercise a measure of control.

#### How Are the Finances to be Found?

The first enterprise that calls for assistance is the Lethbridge Northern Irrigation District. The farmers there who want irrigation on about 100,000 acres, or, if the district is extended, to some 135,000 acres, have satisfied themselves that their proposal is eminently practicable and that it will be profitable. The Dominion government made the detailed surveys; at the instance of the Alberta government these have been fully confirmed by an eminent consulting irrigation engineer. The cost will be about \$50 per acre to be irrigated; the farmers feel assured of making a profit on this investment. They ask the governments to continue to co-operate to help them to attain their wishes; and it cannot be doubted that both the Dominion of Canada and the province of Alberta will meet their desires to improve first, their own and then the country's economic status by making not two, but many, many fold, blades of grass and grain to grow where but one grew before.